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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: COUP RUMORS REFLECT TENSION IN NIGERIA

REF: A. ABUJA 583

[B](#). ABUJA 584

Classified By: CDA RICK ROBERTS FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) AND (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Rumors of a coup attempt began on April Fool,s Day, but no one was laughing. The GON reported that there had been a "breach of security" but denied any coup attempt. Still, Major Hamza al-Mustapha was taken from his maximum security prison for questioning by military intelligence. The GON,s security services have interrogated at least fifty military officers (mostly mid-rank officers) and at least 100 civilians. Reports indicate that about 25 remain in custody and that a military tribunal has been established to try at least some of them. One brigadier who was interrogated maintains that at least three officers have been executed. There is no indication that a coup attempt took place. Rather, it seems that President Obasanjo,s paranoia about the military and his desire to exact a measure of revenge on al-Mustapha are driving the witch-hunt. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) Rumors of a coup attempt shook the GON on April Fool,s Day as the government moved to round up the usual suspects. Beginning with the snatching of Maj. Hamza al-Mustapha, Chief Security Officer for General Sani Abacha and currently awaiting trial for a laundry list of crimes, including murder and theft, from the Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison in Lagos on 31 March, the GON investigation has expanded to include at least 150 persons. Presidency and military spokesmen say that no coup was attempted. They term the roundup as an investigation of a "security breach," allegedly arising from a phone call al-Mustapha made to the President from his cell.

[1](#)3. (C) At least fifty military officers have been questioned in relation to the "breach." Various military and civilian sources say that about 25 remain in detention. About 100 civilians have also been interrogated but it is unknown if any remain in detention. According to several of those interrogated, the focus of the questioning was on their contacts with al-Mustapha. While no pattern for the detentions is obvious, one military detainee claimed that the security services were rounding up "any officer who made a comment during our Town Hall meetings." (NOTE: President Obasanjo made a tour of the country in the last four months, meeting with military officers at each stop to explain his policies and solicit suggestions for improving the lot of the military. END NOTE)

[1](#)4. (C) A military tribunal has reportedly been established at a military base in Abuja in order to try those charged with coup plotting. According to one Igbo civilian in the Presidency, about ten people are expected to stand trial. "Most of them are northerners," he claimed. It is uncertain if any of the trial will be made public, but it is expected to conclude its business within one month.

[1](#)5. (S/NF) A source within Nigeria,s State Security Services (SSS) with access to the Director's office claims that three officers have already been executed. A brigadier from Defense Headquarters who underwent questioning makes the same claim. They say the deaths took place at a military base in Kontagora, Niger State on the night of 1 April. The brigadier says the three may be listed as casualties from a "training exercise." According to the SSS officer, one of the three was the son of a traditional ruler from Niger State and all three were Colonels.

[1](#)6. (S) COMMENT: According to the government's calculation, this is the fourth coup attempt that they have been able to foil. Evidently, the GON is rounding up suspects believed to have plotted to stage a coup in January, 2004. Regardless of the seriousness of this attempt, the Obasanjo regime remains on shaky ground, primarily due to economic and political corruption. Enhanced by Obasanjo's personal paranoia, the GON is looking to blame its faults on detractors, outside troublemakers and western governments. While the current efforts may indeed be targeted at some elements who plotted to overthrow the government, it seems to be looking backward rather than forward. A huge sentiment that it is time for a change exists within the military, the political class and

the general populace. Rather than solving some of Nigeria's myriad problems, Obasanjo and his partners prefer to stalk the ghosts of the past.

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